

Why did Johann Weyer write *De praestigiis daemonum*?

How Anti-Catholicism inspired the Landmark Plea for the Witches¹

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Johann Weyer (1515/1516-1588)'s book *De praestigiis daemonum, et incantationibus ac veneficiis* (On devilish delusions and on enchantments and poisonings), first published in Basel in 1563, counts as a systematic attack on witch theories and witch trials. Vera Hoorens argues that Weyer wrote it not only to defend the witches but also and, perhaps even more, as an instrument to criticise the Catholic Church. This reinterpretation solves the problems that are associated with the traditional interpretation of *De praestigiis daemonum*, including the variety of its contents, Weyer's seemingly enigmatic source use, and his having written the book before and not during the increase in witch trials. The article answers a number of questions that are raised by the reinterpretation, including those surrounding Weyer's religious persuasion, why contemporaries and historians almost unanimously viewed *De praestigiis daemonum* as a treatise against witch trials, and the extent to which he truly cared about the witches.

Waarom schreef Jan Wier *De praestigiis daemonum*? Jan Wier (1515/1516-1588)'s boek *De praestigiis daemonum, et incantationibus ac veneficiis* (Over duivelse begoochelingen en over betoveringen en gifmengerijen), waarvan de eerste editie in 1563 in Basel verscheen, geldt als een systematische aanval op heksentheorieën en heksenprocessen. Vera Hoorens betoogt dat Wier het niet enkel schreef om de heksen te verdedigen, maar ook, en misschien nog wel meer, als een instrument voor zijn kritiek op de Katholieke Kerk. Deze herinterpretatie lost de problemen op die geassocieerd zijn met de traditionele interpretatie van *De praestigiis daemonum*, namelijk de verscheidenheid van zijn inhoud, Wiers schijnbaar raadselachtig bronnengebruik, en het feit dat hij zijn boek schreef voordat en niet terwijl de heksenprocessen toenamen. Dit artikel beantwoordt een aantal vragen die de



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Portrait of Johann Weyer in the 1577 edition of *De praestigiis daemonum*.

Maurits Sabbe Library, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven.

voorgestelde herinterpretatie oproept, zoals wat Wiers religieuze overtuiging was, waarom tijdgenoten en historici *De praestigiis daemonum* bijna unaniem zagen als een traktaat tegen de heksenprocessen, en in welke mate Wier echt om de heksen gaf.

In 1563 the Dutch-born physician Johann Weyer (1515/1516–1588) published *De praestigiis daemonum, et incantationibus ac veneficiis* (On devilish delusions and on enchantments and poisonings).² One of its themes was that alleged witches were innocent and the trials against them unlawful. Weyer criticised the witch trials on three levels – theoretically (refuting the witch concept), methodologically (refuting the arguments underpinning this concept), and judicially.³

De praestigiis daemonum became a hallmark in witch literature. It went through several Latin editions and German and French adaptations soon appeared.⁴ For two centuries scarcely any book on the witches appeared that did not cite Weyer – be it to support or to oppose his views. Once the witchcraft debate gave way to studies of its history, he was celebrated as a hero of courage and scepticism.⁵

In a dedication to his employer, the German duke William of Cleves, Jülich and Berg, Weyer claimed to have written *De praestigiis daemonum* because witchcraft theories provoked the worst possible evil.⁶ Guided by these words and by his role in the witchcraft debate, historians have long assumed that his ultimate goal was fighting the witch trials.⁷ I argue that he wanted to criticise Catholicism, using his indignation at the witch trials as an instrument towards this goal.

1 I warmly thank the editors and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and useful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

2 Johann Weyer is also known as Jan, Jean, and Johan Wier and as Ioannes or Johannes Wierus. On Weyer: V. Hoorens, *Een ketterse arts voor de heksen. Jan Wier (1515-1588)* (Amsterdam 2011); M. Valente, *Johann Wier: Agli albori della critica razionale dell'occulto e del demoniaco nell'Europa del Cinquecento* (Florence 2003).

3 On this three-fold distinction: Stuart Clark, 'Glaube und Skepsis in der Deutschen Hexenliteratur von Johann Weyer bis Friedrich von Spee', in: Hartmut Lehmann and Otto Ulbricht (eds.), *Vom Unfug des Hexen-Processes. Gegnern der Hexenverfolgung von Weyer bis Spee* (Wiesbaden 1992) 16-17.

4 About the editions of Weyer's writings: Hoorens, *Ketterse arts*, 564-567.

5 J.J. Cobben, *Johannes Wier. Zijn opvattingen over bezetenheid, hekserij en magie* (Assen 1960) 144-169; Hoorens, *Ketterse arts*, 383-401, 410-416.

6 I. Wierus, *De praestigiis daemonum, et incantationibus ac veneficiis, libri v* (Basel 1563) 3-4.

7 H.P. Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester 2003) 8; Charles Gunnoe, *Thomas Erastus and the Palatinate: A Renaissance Physician in the Second Reformation* (Leiden, Boston 2011) 342-343; H.C.E. Midelfort, 'Weyer in medizinischer, theologischer und rechtsgeschichtlicher Hinsicht', in: Lehmann and Ulbricht (eds.), *Vom Unfug des Hexen-Processes*, 54; H.R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch Craze of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (London 1969; Reprint London 1988) 73.

Johann Weyer

Born in Grave near Nijmegen, at the age of fifteen Weyer moved to Antwerp to become a *famulus* (student and assistant) of the versatile scholar Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim. In 1534 or 1535 he travelled to Paris where he took classes in medicine. He started practicing medicine upon his return in his hometown. After having worked as a town physician in Arnhem he was, on 21 April 1550, appointed a court physician to William of Cleves, Jülich and Berg. From then on, he spent most of his time in present-day Germany. Nevertheless, he maintained close contacts with the Netherlands and as late as 1580 still considered himself Dutch. While describing an illness, he noticed that in Germany it was called ‘das Rotlauff’ whereas ‘bey uns Niederländeren’ (among us Dutchmen), it was known as ‘die Ross’.⁸

De praestigiis daemonum was Weyer’s first book. He later summarised his views on witches in *De lamiis liber* (Book on witches) that was bound together with *De commentitiis ieiuniis* (On fake fasting). They appeared in 1577, with a new edition in 1582. Among his other works were *De ira morbo, eiusdem curatione philosophica, medica & theologica liber* (Book on the disease of wrath and its philosophical, medical and theological treatment, 1577), *Medicarum observationum rararum liber I* (Book one of rare medical observations, 1567), and *Artzney Buch* (Book of medicine, 1580; new editions in 1583 and 1588). *Pseudomonarchia daemonum* (The pseudo-monarchy of the devils, 1577, 1583) was an edition of a demonological manuscript that circulated in Weyer’s time.

Weyer became known above all for *De praestigiis daemonum* and *De lamiis*. Together, they earned him the reputation of being the first great opponent of the witch trials. Even his fame as a forerunner of modern psychiatry (controversial today) and his reputation as a precursor of human rights – honoured by having mental health organisations and a human rights organisation for health care professionals named after him – are based on his writings about the witches.

De praestigiis daemonum and the Witches

The cumulative witch concept, developed in the fifteenth century, implied that witches were men and (particularly) women who by entering a demonic pact joined the army that the devils recruited for the ultimate battle with Christ.⁹ Once they were recruited, the witches helped the devilish army grow

8 Hoorens, *Ketterse arts*, 438.

9 E.g., Henricus Institoris and Jacobus Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum* I, C. Mackay (ed.) (Cambridge 2006) 46-47.

by stealing babies, bearing devils' children and convincing their friends and relatives to join. They allegedly visited nightly gatherings to receive orders, worship the devil and sacrifice babies. If the Sabbath was far away, witches flew to it after having smeared themselves or their vehicle with witches' ointment. According to witchcraft theorists, the devils gave the witches magical powers to inflict other people with illnesses, conflicts, failures and poor harvests – all with the aim of making the victims lose their Christian faith. It is obvious that witches were extremely dangerous. Fortunately, officials could counteract them by bringing them before the courts. In many countries a confession was required for a conviction. To elicit confessions suspects were tortured, misled with false promises or subjected to trials by ordeal. Once convicted, they risked being burned, strangled or hanged.

Weyer agreed with the witchcraft theorists that the devils were fallen angels who used their supernatural powers to hinder the kingdom of Heaven.¹⁰ Powerful as they were, they did not need any human help. Devils therefore had no reason to enter pacts, which would be powerless and legally void anyway.¹¹ Consistent with this view, Weyer denied the reality of demonic intercourse and the existence of devils' children. He called it nonsense that witches flew to the Sabbath or that witches could work magic. In his view, 'supernatural' illnesses were caused by melancholy, poisoning or malingering, or were the unmediated devil's work. Other disasters, such as hailstorms and crop failures, came from God or straight from the devil.¹²

In Weyer's eyes, the futility of the devil's pact and the delusional nature of witches' crimes implied that no one should be persecuted on the basis of witchcraft accusations alone. Just as he, many witchcraft theorists thought that the alleged witches' crimes were more imaginary than real. Nevertheless, they considered the desire to enter a demonic pact, to visit the Sabbath, or to work magic sufficient to render a suspect guilty.¹³ Weyer did not object to any judicial enquiry of alleged witches. He acknowledged that the crimes attributed to them might boil down to cases of fraud or poisoning, yet denied that the outcome of the investigation could ever be related to witchcraft and that alleged witches deserved the death penalty. He also condemned the manner in which the trials were conducted, with their endless questionings, uncritical use of confessions and testimonies, solitarily confinement, sessions of torture and disregard of mitigating circumstances.¹⁴

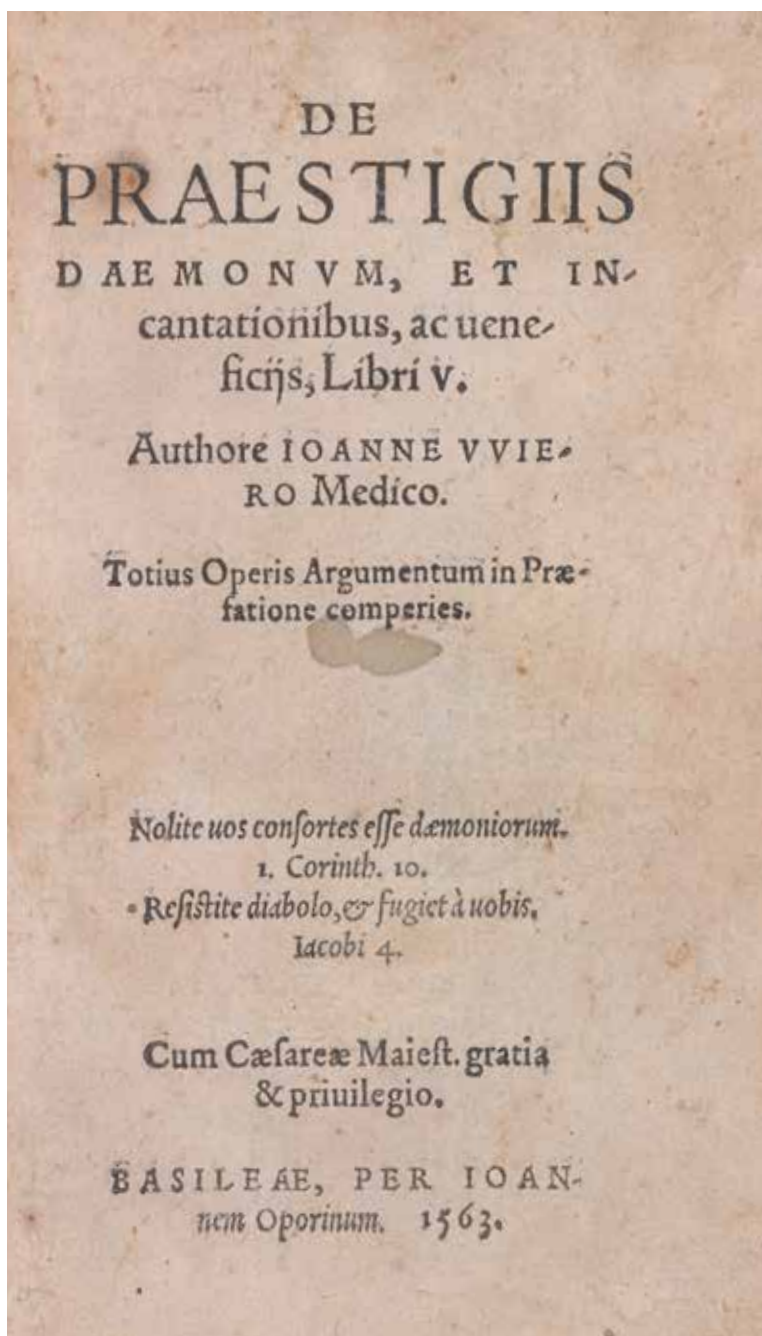
10 I. Wierus, *De praestigiis daemonum, & incantationibus ac veneficiis libri sex. Accessit Liber apologeticus, et Pseudomonarchia daemonum* (Basel 1583) 20, 28-40, 51-62, 103-136, 194-199. Unless stated otherwise, references to *De praestigiis daemonum* (DP) are from this edition. From the 1577 edition on, numbers denote columns.

12 DP, 133, 183-184, 245-249, 267-268, 273, 307-308, 322-355, 365, 440-455, 476-477, 481-482, 664, 732-733, 775-776, 782, 788.

13 S. Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford 1997) 200-202; Clark, 'Glaube', 23-30.

14 DP, 252-265, 283-292, 680-695, 711-713, 718-724.

11 DP, 239-252.



Title page of the first edition of *De praestigiis daemonum*.

Special Collections, University of Amsterdam.

De praestigiis daemonum is arguably the most comprehensive criticism of witchcraft persecution of the early modern period. Yet the assumption that Weyer wrote it with the sole aim of defending alleged witches raises a number of problems. These are related to the book's chronology, contents and sources.

To begin with, *De praestigiis daemonum* has been described as Weyer's response to the witchcraft persecution that occurred in Reformation Germany in the wake of devastating hailstorms in the summer of 1562.¹⁵ The truth is that he must have started writing by 1558 at the latest. Introducing an anecdote about a wicked priest, Weyer stated that he borrowed it from the 'French book' *Narrationes mundi fortuitae* that was published 'three years ago'. He meant *Les comptes du monde aventureux*, an anthology of satirical anecdotes published in 1555 by 'A.D.S.D.' (probably Antoine de Saint-Denis, priest of Champfleur).¹⁶ On 15 March 1562 the theologian, classicist and diplomat Andreas Masius (1514-1573) wrote to Weyer that he had perused the text and forwarded it to another reader, obviously implying that the manuscript by then existed and that Weyer was preparing its publication.¹⁷

Witch hunts had certainly occurred in the early fifteenth century and a second wave had taken place around the turn of the century. Even so, the middle decades of the sixteenth century formed a relatively calm period.¹⁸ In *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* Martin Luther wrote: 'When I was a child, there were many witches and sorcerers [...] but now, in the light of the gospel, these things be not so commonly heard of'.¹⁹ Tellingly, no re-editions of the *Malleus maleficarum* or of any other important fifteenth-century witchcraft treatise appeared between 1521 and 1576.

The above is not meant to state that no witches were persecuted between 1520 and 1562. Dozens of witches were executed in the first half of the century in the Low Countries alone: a 'wave of witch trials' allegedly

15 L. Dooren, *Doctor Johannes Wier. Leven en werken* (Aalten 1940) 15, 23. On hailstorms provoking witchcraft persecutions: G.K. Waite, *Eradicating the Devil's Minions: Anabaptists and Witches in Reformation Europe, 1525-1600* (Toronto 2007) 144-145.

16 A.D.S.D., *Les comptes du monde aventureux* (Paris 1555) 112v-115v. F. Aït-Touati and A. Blanckaert, 'Le démon de la littérature ou la construction de la preuve dans des textes démonologiques des XVIe et XVIIe siècles', in: F. Lavocat and P. Kapitaniak

(eds.), *Fictions du Diable: Démonologie et Littérature de Saint Augustin à Léo Taxil* (Genève 2007) 88-89; G.A. Pérouse, *Nouvelles françaises du XVIe siècle: Images de la vie du temps* (Genève 1997) 139-155.

17 M. Lossen (ed.), *Briefe von Andreas Masius und seinen Freunden, 1538 bis 1573* (Leipzig 1886) 341-342.

18 B.P. Levack, *The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Harlow 2006) 206; Waite, *Eradicating*, 15, 199, 201.

19 M. Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Philadelphia 1860) 590.

occurred in and around the city of Nijmegen.²⁰ Even then, the number of victims paled into insignificance compared to the number of heretics being burned in the same region. It is unlikely that it would have absorbed a scholar who had left his homeland years before.²¹ The same situation holds true for Europe as a whole where thousands of heretics were executed between 1520 and 1570.²²

It seems, then, that Weyer wrote *De praestigiis daemonum* just before the era of the great witch persecutions began. This chronology has been obscured because some researchers conflated the book's year of publication with the year in which it was written.²³ Moreover, between 1563 and 1583 Weyer revised his book several times. It is theoretically possible that the surge of witch trials contributed to his decision to extend his first book time and time again. Yet he cannot have originally written it with large-scale contemporary persecutions in mind.

If defending the witches was Weyer's ultimate goal, *De praestigiis daemonum* should obviously focus on witches. To be sure, the book abounds with them, but it is also populated by faked ghosts, dishonest exorcists, fabricated miracles, possessed nuns, licentious clerics and popes practicing magic.²⁴ It is precisely the great number of passages having little to do with witches that made British historian Sidney Anglo name *De praestigiis daemonum* a 'vast and rambling work' and Weyer an author with a clear 'inability to integrate his observations within an ordered argument'.²⁵ Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that Weyer was incapable of focusing on his theme. If by the early sixties he was unable to select relevant information, how could he have done so for *De lamiis* (On witches)?²⁶ Intellectual maturation cannot be the answer. After having composed *De lamiis*, Weyer published several more revisions of *De praestigiis daemonum*. Neither was *De lamiis* a simplified version

20 DP, 399-403; H. de Waardt, 'Toveren en onttoveren. Achtergronden en ideeën van enkele bij toverij betrokken personen op de Veluwe in de zestiende eeuw', *Volkskundig Bulletin* 12 (1986) 152-202. Hans de Waardt and Willem de Blécourt, 'De regels van het recht. Aantekeningen over de rol van het Gelderse Hof bij de procesvoering inzake toverij, 1543-1620', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Gelre* 80 (1989) 24-51.

21 M.J.M. Hageman, *Het kwade exempel van Gelre. De stad Nijmegen, de Beeldenstorm en de Raad van Beroerten, 1566-1568* (Nijmegen 2005) 115-129.

22 W. Monter, 'Heresy Executions in Reformation Europe, 1520-1565', in: O.P. Grell and B. Scribner

(eds.), *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation* (Cambridge 1996) 48-64.

23 A. Dickson White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom II* (New York 1896; Reprint Gloucester 1978) 122 and 139; Trevor-Roper, *European Witch Craze*, 79.

24 DP, 80-81, 307, 418-429, 476-477, 481-487, 503-504, 591-599, 602-608, 642-643, 671-673.

25 S. Anglo, 'Melancholia and Witchcraft: The Debate between Wier, Bodin and Scot', in: A. Gerlo (ed.), *Folie et Dérailson à la Renaissance* (Brussels 1976) 211-212.

26 I. Wierus, *De lamiis liber. Item de commentitiis ieuniis* (Basel 1577).

for readers who found *De praestigiis daemonum* too difficult. The German editions served just that function. They were still complex, but they were written in the vernacular and thus accessible to a broad audience.

In *De praestigiis daemonum* Weyer went to remarkably great lengths to unmask the wicked and fraudulent ways of clerics and to expose their sexual promiscuity, greed, and lust for power. Accusing popes, bishops, priests and monks of being magicians and in league with the devil, he was ‘determined to find a theory by which to inculcate magicians, far more than [...] to construct a theory by which to exculpate women’.²⁷ Admittedly, there is no inherent contradiction between claiming that ignorant women are innocent and saying that learned magicians are wicked. Yet Weyer’s defence of the witches – if that was his ultimate goal – would have been easier and more coherent if he had stated that devils never recruited humans.²⁸

One would expect a book written to attack the witch trials to cite witchcraft treatises and their sources extensively, if only to refute them. Weyer indeed cited or quoted, among other treatises, Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer’s *Malleus maleficarum* (The witches’ hammer, 1487), Ulrich Molitor’s *De lamiis et phytonicis mulieribus* (On witches and soothsaying women, 1489), Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola’s *Strix sive de ludificatione daemonum* (The witch or on the mystification of demons, 1523), and Paolo Grillando’s *Tractatus de haereticis et sortilegiis* (Treatise on heretics and witches, 1536). Still, none of these ranked among the books that he quoted most frequently.

Weyer’s favourite source was the Church Father Saint Augustine, author of three works that in the Late Middle Ages became the foundation of witchcraft theories. In *De civitate Dei contra paganos libri xxii* (Twenty-two books on the city of God, against the pagans) Augustine argued that the devils were fallen angels. In *De divinatione daemonum liber unus* (A book on the sooth-saying of devils) he described the devils’ nature and powers. *De doctrina Christiana libri quator* (Four books on the Christian doctrine) explained the business-like transaction that came into existence when humans performed ceremonies, made offerings or made incantations to obtain favours from devils.²⁹

Weyer cited all three works. Yet, he also cited other works by Augustine, which had little to do with the witches.³⁰ While citing *De civitate Dei*, *De*

27 C. Baxter, ‘Johann Weyer’s “De Praestigiis Daemonum”: Unsystematic Psychopathology’, in: S. Anglo (ed.), *The Damned Art: Essays in the Literature of Witchcraft* (London 1977) 62.

28 Anglo, ‘Melancholia’, 213; H.C.E. Midelfort, *A History of Madness in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Stanford 1999) 211–213.

29 R. Götz, ‘Der Dämonenpakt bei Augustinus. Seine Hintergrund in der spätantiken Dämonologie und Seine Auswirkungen auf die “wissenschaftliche” Begründung des Hexenglaubens im Mittelalter’, in: G. Schwaiger (ed.), *Teufelsglaube und Hexenprozesse* (München 1987) 57–84.

30 DP, 19–20, 100, 125, 153, 179, 191, 260, 276, 400, 719–721, 781, 789.

divinatione daemonum, and *De doctrina Christiana* moreover, he made no effort to refute their contents.³¹ His carefully selecting and tailoring of quotations reveals that such was not a matter of his misunderstanding their problematic nature. For instance, Augustine argued that biblical examples of human intercourse with angels might refer either to the period before the latter's fall or to the period after it – obviously implying that intercourse with angels was possible. Weyer commented that Augustine had merely reported rumours without revealing his own opinion. He 'forgot' to acknowledge that, according to Augustine, people who reported demonic sex relied on credible sources or on personal observations. Augustine even added that devils obviously lusted after women, a remark that Weyer cut out of the passage.³²

Another indication that Weyer did not primarily discuss Augustine in order to refute ideas underlying the demonic pact is that he paid markedly less attention to the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas.³³ This is significant because Aquinas contributed greatly to the theoretical foundations of the witch concept.³⁴ For instance, he argued that devils could take the form of women, have sex with men, save the sperm, change into men and then impregnate other women with the sperm saved. Not surprisingly, authors of witchcraft treatises such as *Malleus Maleficarum* frequently referred to Aquinas.³⁵ If Weyer had wanted to refute the sources of witchcraft theorists he too should have discussed Aquinas's views much more extensively than he did.

Rather than opposing scholars who supported the persecution and supporting those who opposed it, Weyer treated proponents of the witch trials with respect, attacked their opponents and kept silent about potential allies. Among those whom he spared was the Swiss physician and theologian Thomas Erastus.³⁶ The latter believed that the magical powers of witches were mostly delusional. Yet he believed that the devils could never have become as destructive as they were without the witches' encouragement: for that alone, witches deserved to be burned. When Weyer in *De lamiis* and in later editions of *De praestigiis daemonum* refuted Erastus's view, he delicately named Erastus 'somebody' or 'my opponent'.³⁷ Erastus answered with *Repetitio disputationis de lamiis seu strigibus* (Repetition of the examination of vampires or witches, 1578),

31 DP, 19, 32, 41, 97, 100, 129, 140, 145-147, 184, 192, 250, 252, 265-267, 272, 276, 349, 466-468, 498, 545, 552, 556, 566, 572, 580, 624, 654-656, 661, 733, 767, 781-782, 787.

32 DP, 349. Cf. *De civitate Dei contra paganos libri xxii*, Book 3, Chap. 5, and Book 15, Chap. 23.

33 DP, 200, 260, 264, 275-276, 347-348, 469, 545, 552, 580, 649; C. Kors and E. Peters (eds.), *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700* (Philadelphia 2001) 87-111.

34 C.E. Hopkin, *The Share of Thomas Aquinas in the Growth of the Witchcraft Delusion* (Philadelphia 1940).

35 Hopkin, *The Share*, 153-179.

36 T. Erastus, *Disputationum de medicina nova Philippi Paracelsi*, Vol. I (4 volumes; Basel 1571-1573) 187-215.

37 DP, 741-763.

in which he called Weyer an ‘esteemed scholar’. Apparently avoiding open criticism, they obviously treated each other with all possible respect.³⁸

One potential ally against the witch trials whom Weyer did attack was Jacob Vallick, the Catholic priest of the village of Groessen. Weyer accused Vallick of unlawfully practicing medicine, falsely claiming to heal bewitched people and having written a despicable book. Weyer meant *Tooveren, wat dat voor een werc is, wat crancheit schade ende hinder daer van comende is, ende wat remedien men daer voor doen sal* (Doing magic, what kind of deed that is, which illness, damage and nuisances comes from it, and which remedies one should use against it) that was published in 1559. In *Tooveren*, Vallick argued that people who claimed that they were bewitched were either faking or suffering from delusions or natural illnesses. Rather than joining forces, Weyer expressed how much he despised Vallick.³⁹ Up to now his animosity has been explained in terms of professional jealousy⁴⁰, but as a court physician Weyer can hardly have felt he needed to compete with a parish priest. Moreover, their writings targeted different audiences. Written in the vernacular and mainly consisting of prayers and simple dialogues between the village women Met and Lijs, the latter’s husband Dierck and an unnamed parish priest, *Tooveren* was intended for simple readers. Weyer, in contrast, had written a scholarly text, which he composed in Latin and of which he created a German version only upon discovering that an unauthorised translation had appeared.⁴¹

Besides attacking Vallick, Weyer remained silent about earlier critics of witchcraft theories. One was the physician Symphorien Champier, author of *Dyalogus singularissimus et perutilis in magicarum artium destructionem, cum suis anexis de fascinatoribus, de incubis et succubis et de demoniacis* (Very exceptional and very useful dialogue on the destruction of the magical arts, with an appendix on enchantments, on *incubi* and *succubi* and on the possessed).⁴² Another was the physician Andrés Fernández de Laguna, who interpreted the orgies to which witches confessed as drug-induced dreams.⁴³ It is unlikely that Weyer

38 Gunnoe, *Thomas Erastus*, 339-374; C.D. Jr. Gunnoe, ‘The Debate between Johann Weyer and Thomas Erastus on the Punishment of Witches’, in: J. Van Horn Melton (ed.), *Cultures of Communication from Reformation to Enlightenment: Constructing Publics in the Early Modern German Lands* (Ashgate 2002) 257-285.

39 DP, 216-220.

40 W. Frijhoff, ‘Jacob Vallick und Johann Weyer. Kampfgenossen, Konkurrenten oder Gegner?’, in: H. Lehmann and O. Ulbricht (eds.), *Vom Unfug des Hexen-Processes. Gegnern der Hexenverfolgung von Weyer bis Spee* (Wiesbaden 1992) 65-88.

41 Hoorens, *Ketterse arts*, 210-211 and 225.

42 B.P. Copenhaver, *Symphorien Champier and the Reception of the Occultist Tradition in Renaissance France* (The Hague 1978).

43 H. Friedenwald, ‘Andres a Laguna, a Pioneer in his Views on Witchcraft’, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 7 (1939) 1037-1048; T. Rothman, ‘De Laguna’s Commentaries on Hallucinogenic Drugs and Witchcraft in Dioscorides’ *Materia Medica*’, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 46 (1972) 562-567.

had not heard about them. Laguna studied medicine in Paris while Weyer lived there; Champier was acquainted with Weyer's teacher Agrippa.⁴⁴

***De praestigiis daemonum* as an Anti-Catholic Book**

The content related problems associated with *De praestigiis daemonum* as a book against the witchcraft persecution have until now been presented as authorial weaknesses. If an interpretation provokes so many problems, however, it is worth the effort to consider alternatives. The moment one shakes off the imperative of viewing *De praestigiis daemonum* as a book against the witchcraft persecution, it becomes clear that Weyer's overarching aim was to criticise the Roman-Catholic Church and that he attacked the witch trials as a means to that end.

The cumulative witch concept was developed by Catholic theologians about a century before Weyer wrote *De praestigiis daemonum*. Nearly all governments that before 1560 had persecuted witches were Catholic. Weyer must have had the – then accurate – impression that the witch trials were a Catholic problem. To some, this view may seem inconsistent with John Calvin's allegedly encouraging the witch trials. In a sermon of 2 December 1555 the Geneva reformer indeed argued that the witches should not be forgiven: but by 'witches' Calvin meant Catholics and poisoners (particularly spreaders of the plague), two groups that Weyer also condemned.⁴⁵ In contrast, Calvin argued that the passage from Exodus in which God ordained that witches should be killed was truly about soothsayers or criminals. He did not believe in the reality of demonic sex, thought that the Sabbath and the witches' flight existed only in the imagination of 'unhappy people', and called the idea that 'witches' worked magic or changed into animals demonic delusions – ideas that Weyer also supported.⁴⁶

Interpreting *De praestigiis daemonum* as a book against Catholicism unifies its superficial diversity. Topics like witch trials, wicked popes, possessed cloisters, sexually abusive priests and magic-like sacraments all come together logically as elements in an attack on Rome. The proposed reinterpretation also explains why Weyer discussed possessed and disturbed people along with the witches. From his perspective, the Church victimised all three groups. 'Witches' in the past had risked persecution. Disturbed and 'possessed' people were vulnerable to fraudulent exorcisms and commercial exploitation by greedy priests. Interestingly, Weyer used the keyword *praestigia* ('delusions')

44 Copenhaver, *Symphorien Champier*, 74-75.

45 W.G. Naphy, *Plagues, Poisons and Potions: Plague-Spreading Conspiracies in the Western Alps c.1530-1640* (Manchester 2002).

46 Clark, *Thinking*, 460-461, 522-523; Jensen, 'Calvin', 79 and 82-84; Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft*, 265-270; E.W. Monter, 'Witchcraft in Geneva, 1537-1662', *The Journal of Modern History* 43 (1971) 179-204.

over fifty times. Suggesting that the delusions he discussed primarily had to do with the devils of Rome, however, he used it to describe priests working magic more than to describe alleged witches.⁴⁷ To be sure, he subsumed demonic hallucinations and pre-Christian religions under the category of ‘demonic delusions’, but he mostly meant what he considered Catholic idolatries – from the veneration of relics and the use of blessed palms to the Eucharist itself.

If Weyer criticised the Roman Catholic Church to support the Protestant Reformation, as I submit that he did, then his stressing the devils’ powers is quite understandable. Many sixteenth-century reformers believed that devils were powerfully active in the world and strove to destroy the eternal happiness of human souls. Both Luther and Calvin therefore warned Christians against the devils and urged them to fight these in all possible ways⁴⁸, but why would an adherent of the Reformation inculcate magicians? Weyer seems to have done so to accuse clerics. Describing the Eucharist and other sacraments or rituals as true or attempted magic, he transformed this identification into an unequivocal condemnation by stating that magic was demonically sinful and dangerous.⁴⁹

The interpretation of *De praestigiis daemonum* as an anti-Catholic book also explains Weyer’s source use. He invoked the Church Fathers, and particularly Saint Augustine, just as the reformers did – that is, as representatives of a younger and uncorrupted Church. He even explicitly referred to the ‘purer Church’ of the old days.⁵⁰ Targeting the Catholic Church, he could neither support Catholic scholars nor attack Protestant demonologists. Interestingly, Vallick, Champier and Laguna were Catholics. Reading *Tooveren* might even have opened Weyer’s eyes to a weapon he could use against the Catholic Church, namely witchcraft beliefs and witch trials. While representing the religion Weyer detested, however, at the same time Vallick was the living proof that not all Catholics eagerly hunted witches. These incompatible elements might have provoked conflicting feelings that crystallised into a particularly heartfelt dislike. Erastus, in contrast, was a Protestant. As a physician he shared Weyer’s preference for traditional (that is, pre-Paracelsian) medicine.⁵¹ Perhaps even more importantly, his religious views (which developed throughout his life) ultimately resembled those of the

47 Hoorens, *Ketterse arts*, 190.

48 S. Brauner, ‘Martin Luther on Witchcraft: A True Reformer?’, in: J.R. Brink, A. Coudert, and M. Cline Horowitz (eds.), *The Politics of Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Kirkville 1989) 29-42; J. Haustein, *Martin Luthers Stellung zum Zauber- und Hexenwesen* (Stuttgart 1990); idem, ‘Martin Luther als Gegner des Hexenwahns’, in: Lehmann and

Ulbricht (eds.), *Vom Unfug des Hexen-Processes*, 35-51; P.F. Jensen, ‘Calvin and Witchcraft’, *Reformed Theological Review* 34 (1975) 76-86.

49 DP, 44, 62-66, 84-87, 143-144, 147-152, 535-536, 591-601, 642-643, 646-648.

50 DP, 591, 642, 193, 637.

51 Gunnoe, *Thomas Erastus*, 277-278.

erstorben. des todes krieg hat man
 in dieser von Genuß wylt, in ein
 clafur, Elösingen genant, gefür, von
 Lofelle begraben. Es hat auch der
 Rbad zu Augsburg, irr spär, von hund
 schaffe off diesen krieg ge~~bracht~~ wölger
 aber, davon, von entkommen ist.



▲
 A Jesuit, dressed up as a devil, hopes to have sex with a woman but is stabbed by her servant – a contemporary image suggesting the sexual promiscuity Weyer accused clerics of (Ms. F 18, fol. 158r).

Wickiana Collection, Zentralbibliothek Zürich.

followers of Calvin (with the exception of their views on Church discipline).⁵² Weyer's respect for Erastus might have been based on a shared religious position as well as on shared views on medicine.

New Questions, New Answers

The proposed reinterpretation raises new questions. What was Weyer's own religious persuasion? Did he care about the witches at all? Why have most readers ignored the anti-Catholic nature of *De praestigiis daemonum*? This section addresses these issues.

Scholars have called Weyer a Catholic, an Erasmian Christian, a Protestant of Erasmian or Melanchtonian persuasion, a Spiritualist, a Lutheran and a Calvinist.⁵³ As well as revealing different readings of his works, this variety reflects the vague boundaries that existed in the sixteenth century between denominations, with reformers influencing each other and with contemporary scholars taking eclectic and fluid positions.⁵⁴ Yet it is clear that by the mid-sixties Weyer had taken a Reformed stance.

To be sure, Catholic scholars could criticise the Church. Importantly, however, Weyer went further than singling out aberrations. He attacked all aspects of Catholicism, calling the Eucharist magic and those celebrating it the devils' servants.⁵⁵ His declaration that he was willing to submit his work to the judgment of the Catholic Church and that he would correct proven errors was a statement that many sixteenth-century authors used to avoid accusations of

52 *Ibid.*, 70-247.

53 C. Binz, *Doctor Johann Weyer, ein rheinischer Arzt, der erst Bekämpfer des Hexenwahns* (Berlin 1896; Reprint Wiesbaden 1969) 163-168; H. de Waardt, 'Witchcraft, Spiritualism, and Medicine: The Religious Convictions of Johan Wier', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 42 (2011) 369-391; Midelfort, 'Weyer', 58-59; R. Van Nahl, *Zauberglaube und Hexenwahn im Gebiet von Rhein und Maas: Spätmittelalter Volksglaube im Werk Johan Weyers* (1515-1588) (Bonn 1983) 49-50; G.K. Waite, 'Radical Religion and the Medical Profession: The Spiritualist David Joris and the Brothers Weyer (Wier)', in: *Radikalität und Dissent im 16. Jahrhundert / Radicalism and Dissent in the*

Sixteenth Century, H.J. Goertz and J.M. Stayer (eds.) (Berlin 2002) 167-185; H.J.J. Zwetsloot, 'Johan Wier, zijn geschrift tegen de heksenwaan en zijn religieuze overtuiging', *Annalen van het Thijmgenootschap* 42 (1954) 1-23.

54 About the problematic use of the term 'Calvinism' see, for instance, P. Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven 2002) xii-xxiii. About the religious situation in the Lower Rhine region and in Erastus's Palatinate see, for instance, E. Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford 2012) 376-380; Gunnoe, *Thomas Erastus*, 124-139.

55 DP, 645.

heresy.⁵⁶ In the 1577 and 1583 editions he even qualified it: ‘if someone would pronounce himself to be against these books of mine before error is clearly proven, inflicting on me utter injustice, I very rightfully openly and freely protest against this person’.⁵⁷

Neither should Weyer be considered an ‘Erasmian’ merely because he underpinned his criticism on the execution of heretics with fragments from Erasmus’s *Apologia ad monachos quosdam Hispanos* (Apology against some Spanish monks).⁵⁸ In fact, he borrowed the quotations (as well as several quotations from the Church Fathers) from Sebastian Castello’s anthology *De haereticis, an sint persequendi* (On heretics, whether they should be persecuted).⁵⁹ It seems that he simply sought arguments against executing heretics and that he found a handy source in *De haereticis* – without thereby revealing any affinity with Erasmus.

Some authors have named Weyer a supporter of Spiritualism, a movement based on the idea that people should strive to purge themselves of original sin.⁶⁰ The evidence for this view is meagre. Its adherents argue that Weyer championed Spiritualistic ideas, befriended Spiritualists and corresponded with a Spiritualist leader. Weyer indeed stressed the importance of a clean spirit and a pure faith and attributed a merely symbolic value to religious ceremonies, but these views were by no means unique to Spiritualists. Also consistent with Spiritualism, Weyer described illnesses as the outcome of a deficient liberation from original sin, a wicked personal lifestyle and an excessive attachment to earthly matters. While writing that people should throw off ‘the old Adam’ to escape ‘old diseases’, however, he insisted that the many *new* disorders God sent upon sixteenth-century dwellers were far more dreadful than the known old diseases.⁶¹ Some of his views even flatly contradicted Spiritualism. For instance, Weyer described the devils as real and

56 DP, 1563, 479; I. Wierus, *De praestigiis daemonum, et incantationibus ac veneficiis, libri v* (Basel 1564) 554; I. Wierus, *De praestigiis daemonum, et incantationibus ac veneficiis, libri v, tertia editione aucti* (Basel 1566) 720; I. Wierus, *De praestigiis daemonum, et incantationibus ac veneficiis, libri sex* (Basel 1568) 680.

57 I. Wierus, *De praestigiis daemonum, & incantationibus ac veneficiis libri sex, postrema editione quinta aucti & recogniti. Accessit Liber apologeticus, et Pseudomonarchia daemonum* (Basel 1577) 802; DP, 1583, 804.

58 DP, 718-732.

59 Compare [S. Castello], *De haereticis, an sint persequendi, & omnino quomodo sit cum eis agendum* (Magdeburg [Basel] 1554) 88, 112-113, and 115-116, with DP, 718-722; *De haereticis*, 116-117 with DP, 722; and *De haereticis*, 81-85, with DP, 723-773.

60 E.g. De Waardt, ‘Witchcraft’: On Spiritualism: A. Hamilton, *The Family of Love* (Cambridge 1981); J. Dietz Moss, ‘Goddess with God’: Hendrik Niclaes and his Family of Love (Philadelphia 1981).

61 J. Weyer, *Artzney Buch. Von etlichen bisz anher unbekanten und unbeschriebenen Kranckheiten, als da sind, der Schurbauch, Varen, oder lauffende Varen, Pestilenzische Pleurisis und Brustkranckheit, stechend Rippenwehe, Engelendischer Schweisz. Auch Ursachen, Zeichen, Diaeta, und eigentlicher Curation derselben* (Frankfurt 1580).

powerfully active. While listing the devils' powers, appearances, accomplices and conjurations, he even strove to avoid accidents by strategically leaving out demonic seals and by skipping incantations. These precautions reveal that he did take the devils seriously – a view markedly divergent from Spiritualistic views.⁶²

Among Weyer's allegedly Spiritualist friends and admirers were his co-courtier Andreas Masius (in fact, hardly a friend), his printer Johannes Oporinus (1507-1568), and the Spiritualist leader David Joris (1501-1556).⁶³ Admittedly, Oporinus did publish, employ and gave hospitality to (alleged) Spiritualists, but doing so was quite normal for a scholarly printer who welcomed a diverse range of authors.⁶⁴ It is quite telling that he printed a Latin translation of the Koran without any historian calling him a Muslim for doing so.⁶⁵ Some scholars have argued that Reginald Scot (ca. 1538-1599), whose book *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* was inspired by Weyer's, also supported Spiritualism. In fact, the sole evidence is that Scot was acquainted with Spiritualists.⁶⁶ If he was a Spiritualist, this would even explain a remarkable difference between him and Weyer. Scot denied independent powers to devils – a view consistent with Spiritualism, but diverging from Weyer's view. Even the fact that an alleged spiritualist like Justus Velsius called Weyer 'very pious' bears little significance.⁶⁷ The Calvinist surgeon Volcher Coiter (1534-1576) similarly called Weyer outstandingly pious. Weyer himself called people pious, including at least one Lutheran (the 'pious & learned' schoolmaster Adolph Clarenbach) and a Calvinist (Dietrich Groin, the mayor of Wesel, with his 'unusual erudition, piety, wisdom, and humanity').⁶⁸

Historians who believe that Weyer was a Spiritualist read additional evidence in the published letters of his brother Matthias. In some of these letters, Matthias urged a certain Johan W. not to join the Spiritualists. In letters to his brother Arnt, Matthias reported that his efforts had been successful.⁶⁹ Yet, when Matthias wrote to his brothers he typically addressed them as 'dear

62 Cf. Gary K. Waite, "Man is a Devil to Himself": David Joris and the Rise of a Sceptical Tradition towards the Devil in the Early Modern Netherlands', *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis / Dutch Review of Church History* 75 (1995) 1-30.

63 De Waardt, 'Witchcraft', 373-383.

64 Steinmann, *Johannes Oporinus*, 9 and 77-79.

65 H. Clark, 'The Publication of the Koran in Latin: A Reformation Dilemma', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 15 (1984) 3-12.

66 D. Wootton, 'Reginald Scot / Abraham Fleming / The Family of Love', in: Stuart Clark (ed.), *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and*

Meaning in Early Modern Culture (Basingstoke 2001) 119-138; Philip C. Almond, *England's First Demonologist: Reginald Scot & 'The Discoverie of Witchcraft'* (London 2011) 182-189.

67 Cf. De Waardt, 'Religious Convictions', 381-382.

68 DP, 598 and 640; Hoorens, *Ketterse arts*, 291.

69 De Waardt, 'Religious Convictions', 376-378; M.W. [Mathijs Wier], *Grondelicke onderrichtinghe, van veelen hoochwichthighen artuculen, eenen yeghelijcken die tot reyniginghe zijre sonden ende in die wedergeboorte begheert te comen, seer dienstelijck*, s.n. [Harmen Jansz Muller], 'Francfurt' [Amsterdam] 1579, 41, 49-53, 55-56.

brother' whereas he named the would-be spiritualist 'dear Johan' and called him 'that man'. Even if he did mean his brother Johann, the observation that his correspondent had abandoned his interest would imply that the latter did *not* join the Spiritualists.

Finally, Weyer has also been claimed to be the 'J. van Grave' to whom David Joris wrote on 21 August 1550, 'Johan Chyrurg van Cleef' to whom Joris wrote in 1555, and the 'Master Jan' in Paris to whom he wrote on 29 April 1556.⁷⁰ Importantly, however, 'Johann' and other names starting with J. were common in sixteenth-century Germany and even in Weyer's hometown Grave. Moreover, Weyer never seems to have been called 'surgeon'. By 1556 it was almost twenty years since he had left Paris.

In contrast, there are many indications that Weyer supported the Reformation. In *De praestigiis daemonum*, he celebrated the eras of the Apostles and the Church Fathers and took sides with Protestant reformers. His support for the Reformation is evident from a letter to a correspondent who was in all likelihood the Melanchthonian physician Matthias Stoy (1526-1583). 'This is the test of our faith, this is the sign of our persuasion', Weyer wrote, 'that we tolerate persecution for the sake of the true doctrine'.⁷¹ Still, the single most convincing piece of evidence comes from a subtle yet crucial change in a quote from Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia libri tres* (Three books on occult philosophy). After describing various superstitions, Agrippa stated that these should not dominate 'our Catholic religion'. Weyer copied the excerpt but changed the conclusion to read that they should not overshadow 'our Christian religion'.⁷²

Weyer dedicated several works to Protestants. His German adaptation of *De praestigiis daemonum* was dedicated to, among others, the theologian Albert Hardenberg. *De lamiis* and *De commentitiis ieiuniis* were dedicated to count Arnold von Bentheim and *Artzneybuch* was dedicated to Arnold's mother countess Anna von Tecklenburg.⁷³ Moreover, Dutch nobles and scholars

70 De Waardt, 'Religious Convictions', 378-379; Waite, 'Radical Religion', 172 and 179-181.

71 Johann Wier (Weyer), 1 Brief an unbekannt, Dinslaken 16.8.1577, Signatur: Sup. ep. 1, 304, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky; J. Geffcken, 'Dr. Johannes Weyer. Altes und Neues vom ersten Bekämpfer des Hexenwahns', *Monatshefte der Comenius-Gesellschaft* 13 (1904) 139-148; Hoorens, *Ketterse arts*, 292-297; P.E. Henry, *Das Leben Johann Calvins, des großen Reformators* II (Hamburg 1838) 503.

72 Compare V. Perrone Compagni (ed.), C. Agrippa, *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres* (Leiden 1992) 411-412, with DP, 569.

73 DP, 153, 340, 591, 637, and 642; G. Toepke, *Die Matrikel der Universität Heidelberg von 1386 bis 1662. Zweiter Teil von 1554 bis 1662* (Heidelberg 1886; Reprint Nendeln 1976) 498; Johannes Weyer, Brief an Coiter, Volcher (1577) 6 Junij [1577], Cliviae [Cleve]. 2.^o, 1 S. u. A. Briefsammlung Trew (Online-Ausgabe, Erlangen 2007; www.trew-letters.com); Hoorens, *Ketterse arts*, 292-294. At least one contemporary scholar named Weyer 'impious like his true master Calvin': M. Del Rio, *Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex* (Mainz 1617) 185.

whom Weyer befriended over the course of his adult life all seem to have been Protestants. Several revealed themselves as leading figures in the Dutch Revolt or fled the Netherlands during Alba's reign.⁷⁴ From 1568 on Weyer himself was suspected of inspiring Duke William's support for the Dutch rebels. In all likelihood he and his friends mutually inspired each other's political and religious views. It is telling, for instance, that Weyer first quoted the Scottish historian George Buchanan's satirical *Franciscanus* (The Franciscan, printed in 1566, in which the author accused Franciscans of violating the secret of the confessional, misleading the faithful, and being heterosexually and homosexually promiscuous) precisely in the year his friend Carolus Utenhovius (1536-1600) published a Latin edition entitled *Franciscanus et fratres*.⁷⁵

In all likelihood Weyer did not fake his concern for the witches. The emotional voice in which he described their plight alone suggests that he must have honestly felt for them. The point is that when he started writing *De praestigiis daemonum*, defending witches was not his *sole* and not his *ultimate* goal. Instead, it was part of his endeavour to accuse what he considered an unchristian faith and a corrupted Church. Nor did Weyer dissimulate his aim. He merely chose a topic that was close to his heart (the witches) as a gateway to a broader topic (Catholicism). From a twentieth-century perspective he might have chosen a more straightforward issue with which to attack Catholicism, but when he drafted *De praestigiis daemonum* the link between the witch trials and Catholicism was so clear that contemporary readers did not need Weyer to make his ultimate aim more explicit. There is even nothing misleading about Weyer's claim in his dedication to Duke William that he was so moved by the witches' plight that he wrote a book about them. In all likelihood he simply highlighted his most impressive argument. That he did not write that he discussed the witch trials in order to attack the Church was hardly an omission – especially as he contextualised the issue among other sixteenth-century religious conflicts. As examples of these other issues he mentioned the fierce controversies about 'the proper conduct of ceremonies and the correct interpretation of the Scripture'.⁷⁶

Given that Weyer continued revising and extending *De praestigiis daemonum* and that in 1577 he published *De lamiis*, is it possible that his main interest shifted from criticising the Church to defending the witches? In fact

74 E.g. Hoorens, *Ketterse arts*, 30, 225-228, 254, 256-259, 261, 279-280, 289-292, 336-337, 365-368.

75 Georgii Buchanani, *Franciscanus et fratres, Quibus accessere varia eiusdem & aliorum Poëmata quorum & titulos & nomina XVI indicabit pagina* (Basel s.d. [1568]).

76 DP, 1563, 3-4.

there is no cogent reason to assume that indignation about the witch trials supplanted his original aim. Many additions to *De praestigiis daemonum* had little or nothing to do with the witches. While arguing against the death penalty for heretics, for instance, Weyer included more patristic quotes with each new edition until 1577.⁷⁷ To be sure, *De lamiis* was about the witches. Yet rather than providing a summary of *De praestigiis daemonum*, it provided a selection of some of its chapters. In all likelihood, Weyer compiled it because the rise of the witch trials rendered one theme of *De praestigiis daemonum* extremely topical – just as he might have compiled a collection of stories about possessed cloisters had their prevalence increased. His doing so does not imply that his interest in the witches had become more profound or more focused. If such were true, *De lamiis* in his eyes would have rendered subsequent editions of *De praestigiis daemonum* redundant – which obviously was not the case.

Even so, most readers soon viewed *De praestigiis daemonum* as a book solely in defence of the witches. Even contemporary Catholic scholars such as the theologian Martín Del Rio (1551-1608) and the jurist Jean Bodin (1530-1596) opposed Weyer for this reason.⁷⁸ What then, obscured the book's true nature? Part of the explanation lies in the circumstance that large-scale witchcraft prosecutions began around the time the first edition of *De praestigiis daemonum* appeared. The witchcraft theme must have absorbed readers' attention, making it difficult to understand that a treatise dealing with it ultimately addressed something else. Once the period of the great witch persecutions began, moreover, by no means were these persecutions concentrated within the geographical boundaries of Catholic territories. To be sure, Catholic rulers continued to persecute witches: yet Protestant rulers also encouraged or at least allowed witch trials.⁷⁹ Not surprisingly, Protestant authors started contributing to the witchcraft debate, which even became a rare domain in which the division between 'believers' and 'non-believers' cut through confessional borders. In 1564 for instance, the Calvinist theologian Lambert Daneau published *Les sorciers, dialogue très utile et très nécessaire pour ce temps* (The witches, a dialogue that is very useful and necessary for this time). Similarly, the Calvinist preacher William Perkins authored *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* that appeared in 1608.

Still, it would have been strange if *all* Weyer's contemporaries had ignored its anti-Catholic nature. In his letter of 15 March 1562 Andreas Masius

77 Compare DP, 1563, 464-466; with DP, 1564, 536-539; DP, 1566, 669-675; DP, 1568, 620-633; DP, 1577, 719-733; DP, 1583, 6-17, 724-733.

78 Clark, *Thinking*, 668-682; P. Nagel, *Die Bedeutung der 'Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex' von Martin Delrio für das Verfahren in Hexenprozessen*

(Frankfurt 1995) 213-218; J.L. Pearl, *The Crime of Crimes: Demonology and Politics in France 1560-1620* (Waterloo 1999) 110-126.

79 E.W. Monter, 'Witch Trials in Continental Europe: 1560-1660', in: B. Ankarloo, S. Clark, and E.W. Monter (eds.), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe IV* (London 2002) 28.

called the book non-original and ill-structured. Tellingly, however, he also deplored that it attacked the ‘splendid traditions of the Catholic faith’.⁸⁰ In 1573, Weyer’s friend and colleague Bernardus Dessenius of Cronenburg qualified *De praestigiis daemonum* as a book ‘against frauds and defenders of frauds’.⁸¹ It is also significant that the Emden bookseller Gaspar Staphorst’s catalogue for 1567 included the edition of *De praestigiis daemonum* of 1566. Staphorst traded exclusively in Protestant books and his catalogue mainly consisted of treatises about – mostly Calvinist – theology and exegesis.⁸²

Neither did subsequent generations read *De praestigiis daemonum* solely as a book against witches. The Puritan polemist William Prynne (1600–1669) as early as 1655 wrote that in Weyer’s works one could read ‘at leisure’ about ‘popish monkes, friers, priestes, nunnes, papists, specially females’ obsessed by the devil.⁸³ The eighteenth-century Anglican bishop George Lavington (1684–1762) used *De praestigiis daemonum* as a sourcebook on what he viewed as Catholic idolatries, falsehoods, superstitions and popish fanaticism.⁸⁴ It seems, then, that the anti-Catholic character of *De praestigiis daemonum* has never been completely overlooked.

Conclusion

Participants in the witchcraft debate and historians have mostly interpreted *De praestigiis daemonum* as a plea against the witch trials. Yet there is ample reason to believe that Weyer addressed the witchcraft issue – using his unfeigned indignation at the trials – in order to attack Catholicism. The twentieth-century historian Christopher Baxter has already described *De praestigiis daemonum* as ‘an ideological attack on Catholic idolatry and superstition’ that came ‘close to equating Catholic saints themselves with devils’.⁸⁵ Rather than singling out ‘superstitious’ or ‘abusive’ elements, however, Weyer targeted Catholicism at its heart.

The proposed interpretation implies that Weyer’s role in the contemporary witchcraft debate was at least partly a matter of historical coincidence. Weyer could not have foreseen that the witch persecution would intensify during the time and shortly after *De praestigiis daemonum* was in

80 Lossen, *Briefe*, 341–342.

81 B. Dessenius, *Medicinae veteris et rationalis. Adversus oberronis cuiusdam mendacissimi atque impudentissimi Georgij Fedronis, ac universae sectae Paracelsicae imposturas, defensio* (Cologne 1573) 170.

82 A. Pettegree, ‘Emden as a Centre of the Sixteenth-Century Book Trade: A Catalogue of

the Bookseller Gaspar Staphorst’, *Quaerendo* 24 (1994) 114–135.

83 W. Prynne, *The Quakers Unmasked* (London 1655) 8–10.

84 G. Lavington, *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared* (London 1754) 2, 51–52, 58, 63–67, 70, 132–135, 143–147, 171–172, 178, 184, and 205.

85 Baxter, ‘Johann Weyer’s’, 54–55.

print. The reinterpretation also implies that some Catholic scholars might have rejected and some Protestant scholars may have supported the views in *De praestigiis daemonum* more than they would have done without the book having such a distinctively anti-Catholic content. Needless to say that later Weyer's anti-Catholicism anything but discouraged the anti-clerical early historiographers of the witch persecution to put him in the limelight.⁸⁶

Nevertheless, Weyer's striving to criticise Catholicism inspired what may well be the most comprehensive rebuttal of witchcraft theories of the Early Modern Age. It also brought certain themes to the foreground and thus set an agenda for future contributors to the witchcraft debate. For instance, Weyer's Protestant persuasion inspired him to defend the witches by stressing rather than by downplaying the powers of the devils and the evil deeds of magicians – thus forcing later scholars to address the relationship between their views of the witches with their views of learned magicians. As it is hard to find any witchcraft theorist having marked the witchcraft debate as broadly and as profoundly as Weyer therefore, he seems more than deserving of his reputation as a pivotal figure in the history of the witchcraft debate. ◀

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86 M. Gaskill, 'The Pursuit of Reality: Recent Research into the History of Witchcraft', *The Historical Journal* 51 (2008) 1069-1088.